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ABSTRACT

Self-esteem is cumulative and proactive. Events and people surrounding an individual have a direct relationship with the development of self-esteem. Factors influencing a child's self-esteem begin from the time the infant is in the mother's womb. A unique self-esteem develops for each child whether from a cohesive family, from a foundling home, or from a single parent. The migrant child's experiences parallel the same experiences of other children, but with the added dimension of cultural adjustment. Studies on self-esteem provide some implications for understanding and explaining the migrant child's needs. This paper formulates a theoretical framework for self-esteem and child development. The characteristics of the following levels of self-esteem are examined as are the implications for the cultural adjustment of migrant children: high-high, low-low, high-low, low-high, low-medium, high-medium, medium-low, medium-medium, and medium-high. A grid is formulated which classifies the levels of self-esteem to levels of cultural adjustment. The need for experimentally controlled studies comparing the self-esteem of migrants and the process of cultural adjustment is cited. (Author/NQA)

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Self-Esteem: A Theoretical Framework and the Implications for Migrant Children

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Running head: Self-Esteem: the Implications for Migrant Children

Abstract

A theoretical framework for self-esteem and child development is formulated. The characteristics of various levels of self-esteem are examined as are the implications of these to the cultural adjustment of migrant children. A grid is formulated which classifies levels of self-esteem to levels of cultural adjustment. The need for experimentally controlled studies comparing the self-esteem of migrants and the process of cultural adjustment is cited.

Self-Esteem: A Theoretical Framework and the Implications for Migrant Children

Introduction

Coopersmith (1959, 1960, 1967) defines self-esteem as the evaluation a person makes of her/himself. Self-esteem implies the maintenance of self-evaluation, expresses an attitude of approval or disapproval, and indicates whether or not the person believes her/himself to be capable, significant, successful, and worthy. Personal judgement of worthiness is expressed in the attitudes the individual holds toward her/himself, as well as verbal reports and other overt expressive behavior.

Branden (1969) defines self-esteem as a standard by which a person judges her/himself, an estimate, a feeling, and an emotion. This self-evaluation is the single most significant key to behavior, which affects the thinking processes, emotions, desires, values, and goals. Branden adds that to understand a person psychologically, it is vital to understand the nature and degree of self-esteem.

The literature on self-esteem (Branden, 1969; Brockner and Wallnau, 1981; Coopersmith, 1959, 1960, 1967; Herbert & Gelfand & Hartman, 1969; Gelfand, 1962; Pavur & Little, 1981; Van Turner & Ramanaiah, 1979) helps us to look at self-esteem as a construct that explains a person's ability to adapt to the environment. The inner balance and stability which each person achieves is directly related to their emotions, social relationships, and behaviors. The inner, private and unique world of each individual is expressed in interactions, needs, activities, and harmony or disharmony.

Self-esteem is cumulative and proactive. The events and the people which surround the individual have a direct relationship with the development of self-esteem. This paper attempts to report on a theoretical framework for self-esteem and child development, and the implications for understanding the needs of migrant children.

Theoretical Framework

Coopersmith (1967) in his study, suggests four major factors which are important in the development of self-esteem: (1) the treatment and acceptance received from significant others in life, (2) our past successes, (3) the values and aspirations which modify and interpret our experiences, and (4) how a person responds to devaluation. Self-esteem is described by Coopersmith as a process of integration, where the individual becomes a member of the group and internalizes ideas and attitudes as a mirror image, via key figures and by observing actions and attitudes. Self-esteem is a form of self-protection since any loss of self-esteem can bring feelings of distress. Since the presence of anxiety can minimize our self-esteem, defences allow the maintenance of an idealized image.

Herbert and Gelfand and Hartman (1969) in an experimantal setting, indicate that children learned self-critical behavior by imitating a model's behavior, even when this meant a loss of reward.

Dittes (1958) indicates that the well accepted individual finds group membership more attractive. The significance of this concept lies in the fact that lower-self-esteem individuals have greater needs for support via acceptance in a group.

Van Tuinen and Ramanaiah (1979) note the distinction between global and social self-esteem; the former includes general personality and mental health, while the latter is related to social interaction with people. Brockner and Wallnau (1981) note that self-focused attention and anxiety are more directly related for the individual with lower self-esteem.

Gelfand (1962) was intersted in determining the personality correlates and responsiveness to social influence process. The findings of this study suggest that self-esteem and pursuability are negatively correlated.

Self-Esteem and Child Development

From the time the infant is in the mother's womb, the factors

influencing a child's self-esteem have already begun. How the mother reacts to the news of the pregnancy, her emotional stability, her everyday experiences, the family structure, the family climate, and the school environment. A unique self-esteem will develop for each of the following children: a child from a cohesive family, from a foundling home, from a single parent.

The physical attractiveness of a child has no relation to self-esteem, while slow motoric development indicates a low self-esteem (Coopersmith, 1967). Academic achievement is the testing ground for future success and the ability to perform academically is associated with feelings of self-worth. Coopersmith (1959, 1960, 1967); Gelfand, 1961; Herbert & Gelfand & Hartman, 1969; concluded that the self-esteem is significantly associated with early childhood, parental characteristics, parental attitudes, treatment, power, significance, virtue, and competence.

Coopersmith (1959, 1960, 1967) states that children with positive self-esteem are expressive in their emotions and less anxious, while low self-esteem children have an impoverished emotional life, show high negative effects, are helpless, apprehensive, lack self confidence and experience feelings of rejection. Children reared in homes with democratic practices exhibit self confidence, are competitive and assertive. Low self-esteem children are more destructive, more anxious, have more psychosomatic symptoms, but are no more aggressive or delinquent than their counterparts (aggressiveness would require initiative and assertiveness).

The gap between aspirations and fulfillment is less for children with high self-esteem. The children with high self-esteem, according to Coopersmith (1969), are also high in self confidence, expect to be successful, have trust in themselves, have the courage to express ideas, are socially independent, are creative, can form friendships, are not self-conscious or pre-occupied with personal problems. The differences in self-esteem will bring about differences in handling the environment.

Coopersmith (1969) states that dependent children learn to rely on others to determine their courses of action and opinions and to determine their worthiness. He also states that a dependent person can survive in the sheltered environment but that there is difficulty outside these bounds. The children with a medium self-esteem are value oriented (typical of the dependent person) and supportive of general social values, less venturesome and tend to choose safer occupations and take fewer risks.

Branden (1969) suggests that through daily choices, there is a cumulative result which will develop into the self, the sum character. Branden indicates that children become aware of the power to choose their actions and that to be right is to be fit for happiness, while to be wrong is to be threatened by pain. Branden notes that children have the need for self-respect, the need for pleasure, and the need for a positive view which must be discovered. He suggests that basic values reflect conscious and subconscious views of the self. Branden adds that children have the need to enjoy life via recreation, productive work, human relations and art..

Early in life, children distinguish between emotions and knowledge, although this does not imply repression or dismissing emotions (Branden, 1969). With the integration of values, children will have harmony in mind and emotions (Branden, 1969).

Branden (1969) concludes that if children surrender efficacy, they surrender the possibility of achieving full self-esteem. If the world is incomprehensible and threatening to the child, the result may be an attitude of passivity and dependence. The child who tries to understand the environment may suffer early in life, but will not be alienated from reality. Branden notes that if a child subverts the cognitive self-confidence, while in school, this will spread to other areas, issues, and problems. Children can be alienated from reality, experience humiliation, have a low self-esteem and therefore remain passive when meaningful values are attacked and retreat from challenges (Branden, 1969).

Implications for the Migrant Child

From the studies on self-esteem (Branden, 1969; Brockner and Wallnau, 1981; Coopersmith, 1959, 1960, 1967; Herbert & Gelfand & Hartman, 1969; Gelfand, 1962; Pavur & Little, 1981; Van Turner & Ramanaiah, 1979) some implications which will help to understand and to explain the needs of migrant children may be concluded. The experience of the migrant child will of course parallel the same experiences of other children, but there will be an added dimension: cultural adjustment.

The term adjustment is defined by Taft (1973) as including feelings of harmony with the environment, and can be acquired without changing social norms and values. The external adjustment, according to Taft (1973) is reflected in emotional and personality adjustment.

The child with a High-High self-esteem would be the child who has the supportive home environment, knowledge of the language and culture, has agreed or has been well prepared for his migratory experience, is able to establish high interpersonal relations, exhibits self-confidence and is thus able to become culturally adjusted.

Figure 1

Self-Esteem and Cultural Adjustment

	Low	Medium	High
Low	marginality socially & academically unsuccessful	development of social skills in the majority culture no personal improvement	low self-evaluation high academic & social success
Medium	accommodation cognitive dissonance	habituation conformity	assimilation
High	defensive distortion	assimilation	cultural adjustment

The Low-Low child on the other hand, would be the child who is ill prepared for migration, whose family exhibits extremes in management, is submissive and withdrawn, is impoverished emotionally, shows poor interpersonal relations and is thus uanble to adapt to the migration process.

The High-Low child is the one who appears defensive in his attitude while the Low-High has a low self-evaluation even in the presence of success.

The Low-Medium does not indicate personal improvement in the adjustment process while the High-Medium indicates assimilation which implies adding to the action system, consistent with the already organized inner world.

The Medium-Low is in a state of cognitive-dissonance and exhibits accommodation which implies a change in the thinking and in its purest form would be complete imitation. The Medium-Medium child has learned to be dependent and less venturesome and is in a state of habituation which implies perceiving, looking at the new culture, a somewhat static state for our purposes.

The Medium-High child is in a state of assimilation which is consistent with his already organized inner world. The High-High child is the one that has made complete adaptation and indicates cultural adjustment.

The child and his family are undergoing many changes in the migration process. The already existing framework of a unique self-esteem may be helpful or may hinder the cultural adjustment. The family structure and attitudes which the family maintains will also have positive or negative effects on the adjustment process.

The studies on self-esteem indicate implications for the prevention of low self-esteem and for parental education. There is a need for experimentally controlled studies which would compare the self-esteem of migrants and the process of cultural adjustment. Parents and educators would benefit from this information.

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